

TOWARDS QUICKER, BETTER ASSESSMENT USING AUDIO FEEDBACK

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Bob Rotheram, Office of Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Assessment, Learning and Teaching), Leeds Metropolitan University.
b.rotheram@leedsmet.ac.uk

Abstract

The JISC-funded 'Sounds Good' project at Leeds Metropolitan University (www.soundsgood.org.uk) is exploring the use of digital audio for feedback on students' work. A central issue is whether the use of MP3 files makes it possible to provide students with richer feedback *and* save staff time. The latest results will be presented to the conference as a work in progress, with a view to refining the paper and planning future research.

Introduction

The National Student Survey consistently reports that assessment and feedback are the aspects of their experience which students in higher education find least satisfactory (HEFCE, 2007). From a staff perspective, providing assessment feedback is labour-intensive when, as now, student-staff ratios are high and, as is common, the feedback is in writing. In such circumstances there is pressure to keep feedback brief, with the risk that it may not be particularly helpful to students. Moreover, it is quite common for such feedback as is provided to be misunderstood, ignored or not even collected.

Clearly, there could be benefits to students and staff if ways could be found to provide richer feedback more quickly and more accessibly. Rust (2001) recommended giving feedback via audio-cassette. However, this technique has never been widely adopted and cassette technology is becoming obsolete. Now, though, digital audio recording software and hardware are becoming more readily available. How efficient and effective is it to give students oral (rather than written) feedback via easily-distributable and widely-accessible MP3 files?

Exploratory work by Bob Rotheram, National Teaching Fellow (NTF), involved using MP3 files for summative feedback on student assignments on a postgraduate programme. This study (Rotheram, 2007) indicated benefits for students: feedback which was more extensive, clearer, more personal and easily-accessible. Staff also benefited: saving time by speaking rather than writing the feedback. Students were very positive about the experiment, with several noting the extra element of non-verbal communication.

Between January and July 2008 the experimentation is being scaled up in the project *Sounds Good: Quicker, better assessment using audio feedback*, funded under the Users and Innovation programme of the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). A team of experienced teachers at Leeds Metropolitan University is widening the focus to both formative and summative feedback, in various disciplines, at different educational levels. The experimentation includes delivering digital sound files containing feedback to students via a virtual learning environment, email and mobile devices. The objectives include production of practice guidelines on using digital audio for feedback to students. The guidelines will cover not just technical matters, but also educational issues and practical considerations such as when it may or may not be worth providing digital audio feedback.

At the time of writing, the *Sounds Good* project is in its middle stages. A developing website is available at www.soundsgood.org.uk. The project will have reached the writing-up stage when the 2008 CAA Conference is being held. The latest version of this paper will be presented to the conference as a work in progress. Feedback will be sought, as a way of refining the paper and planning further research.

Project design

Thirteen Leeds Met staff, each of whom is teaching students during Semester 2 of 2007-8, have been equipped and trained in at least one of three methods of producing digital audio feedback on student coursework assignments:

- an MP3 recorder;
- Audacity and the LAME encoder (free audio recording and editing software);
- 'WIMBA' voice tools (available via the University's virtual learning environment).

Each team member is being supported in providing assignment feedback (formative and summative) to a selection of their students. In addition, one team member is experimenting with an 'out-of-the-box' Apple laptop audio production tool which claims ease of access and portability. Efforts have been made to ensure that students are drawn from differing types of programme (e.g. full- and part-time, with and without placements) and at different educational levels. Methods of delivering the assignment feedback include Leeds Met's virtual learning environment (Blackboard Vista), email and mobile devices already issued to students via the 'Assessment and Learning in Practice Settings' (ALPS) Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) in which Leeds Met is a partner.

During the project, team members are each monitoring and evaluating the experience of providing formative and summative feedback via digital audio to a cohort of students on one piece of coursework. Consistent with the exploratory approach of the project, the evaluation strategy is mainly

qualitative rather than quantitative. The main aim is to develop a firmer foundation for further trials. The data gathering includes administering brief questionnaires to students and running focus groups of learners. In addition, the project managers are, via questionnaire and interview, periodically polling the rest of the team as to their experience on the project. There will be some evaluation throughout and, if appropriate, the project design will be amended. However, most evaluation will occur in May-June 2008, after students' coursework has been returned and they have provided comments on the experience. The project report will be completed by July 2008. Depending on outcomes and future funding opportunities, a bid for a larger-scale demonstrator project may follow.

References

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